

The Oxford Dictionary defines *fear* as An unpleasant emotion caused by the nearness of danger or expectation of pain, etc. And that sums up exactly how I see visits to the dental clinic. It is a place of fear and pain. But that fear doesn't start on the day of the visit. The fear starts once the little card arrives and gives me a friendly reminder that it is time for my six-monthly check-up. I place the card under my Superman magnet on the refrigerator door, and there it stays. Every day I look at the friendly reminder. And every day I suffer anxiety. I know I have to see the dentist — you have to visit every six months — that's what the card says. And I must obey. Then, after three months of procrastination, I take action.

I have found the fear of the dentist will disappear if you lose the reminder card. So I take the card off the refrigerator door and place it in my briefcase — once in the briefcase it gets lost among the masses of paper, and will hopefully vanish forever.

An anxiety attack can happen anywhere, any time. At a client meeting I was presenting a report, and out popped my dental reminder card. Everyone thought I had just seen a ghost. I had. So, at an opportune time, I placed the dental reminder card in a colleague's briefcase. I had faced my greatest fear, and won. My colleague went to the dentist.

Toothaches can be painful. In fact, the pain from a toothache can be more painful than the fear of visiting the dentist. If, after the usual remedies, the pain persists I have found I am forced to make the trip to the dentist. Crying and groaning on the telephone will make the receptionist at the dental clinic arrange an immediate appointment. The receptionist will usually comment that you haven't visited for a year. In moments of pain it is best to give receptionists the upper hand — she has the power to make you suffer for another day if she wants. Apologise politely and thank her for fitting you in at short notice. You can always get back at her once the pain has gone.

Dental clinics have reception areas. Here many people sit and wait to see the dentist. They have all answered the call on the dental reminder card. Some are a little anxious, but most wait calmly. These people are experiencing fear brought about from expected pain. They pretend not to notice me as I am experiencing pain right now. I am pain personified, and seeing and hearing me only increases their fear. But I must share my agony with my fellow patients. By the time I have finished sharing, their fear has increased to paranoia and they are left mumbling idiots in the waiting room.

The dental chair is very comfortable, and usually the dental staff are very nice and friendly people. But I never show signs of friendship or pleasantness. If the dentist likes you you'll be back a hundred times. Be miserable and they'll get you out quick smart. When I see people without teeth or with a mouth full of gold I see people the dentist has taken an attraction to. Dentists are human too, and they love a good laugh or a chat — but not with me!

Gazing into my mouth the dentist asks

Fear Of The Unknown

By Patrick McGeown

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when was the last time I visited. I reply *one year ago*. He gives a look of surprise. I explain the receptionist forgot to post a reminder. He apologises. I feel a bit guilty — but not for too long. He is now on a mission of discovery. And as a patient I am eager that the deep, dark secrets that have been lurking in my mouth be revealed. I want the truth — and quickly. But he prods around, taking his time to finish the examination. I watch for telltale signs of the future. A nod of the head could mean a filling. Eyebrows raised might mean an extraction. But when both eyebrows crunch together in the centre, I'm ready to pass out: that could mean major work.

Don't talk with your mouth full. That's what my mother used to say at the dinner table. But at the dental clinic I am excused. Cotton wool is stuffed around my mouth, a suction pump hangs foul, clamps are fastened around my teeth, and the dentist is manoeuvring a stainless steel wrench around some molars. And he asks me a question. Not a simple question, mind you. A question that requires a sentence to answer. I answer to the best of my ability. It requires effort, and what I say is indecipherable. The dentist understands perfectly. He is a master of linguistics. I have a secret belief that when dentists get together they talk in this amazing tongue that only they understand — have you ever noticed the way dentists always leave the room to talk on the phone?

Drilling a tooth is painless. But that needle! And why does it take so long to prepare the needle? That is one of the great mysteries of our time. The dentist tells me not to tense up, and to stay calm. I mumble to the dentist that I am calm: my hands normally lose their colour when I clench the armrest, and it is normal for my eyes to show terror.

There is nothing like the sound of a dentist's drill. My fear is not the drill, but what if the anaesthetic wears off before the drilling is complete? This fear I have carried a lifetime. I see myself screaming in agony when the drill homes in on an unexposed nerve. It has never happened, but I am prepared. Many a time the dentist has stopped drilling to ask if I am feeling all right. I usually nod mindlessly.

After packing the hole and a polish I still feel tense. I imagine the dentist is going to tell me some bad news, and that I have to come back for further treatment. But when he tells me it's over, I want to cry with relief. I clutch both his hands and shake them as if we are long lost friends. At that moment I love the dentist. I leave the dental surgery smiling. The receptionist glares at me. The dentist has told her to be more efficient in sending out reminder cards.

Six months later the fear resumes. It is time for the reminder card. But I have a little trick, remember. The reminder card will make its way into my briefcase and disappear. I won't have to visit until toothache time.

Registered mail is an efficient way to send dental reminder cards. If I knew it was a dental reminder card I would never have signed for it. Now the dental clinic has one up on me, and I am frightened. **L**